

Elephant Hotel,
Somers, Westchester County,
New York.

HABS No. 4-101 HABS
NY
60-SOM
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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

District No. 4
Southern New York State

Historic American Buildings Survey
Wm. Dewey Foster, District Officer,
25 West 45th Street, New York City.

THE ELEPHANT HOTEL
Somers, Westchester Co., N.Y.

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Location and Date

The Village of Somers is situated near the centre of the row of villages which lie along the northern border of Westchester Co., N. Y. It is about 20 miles north of White Plains and 50 miles north of New York. All this part of the Country, extending from the Hudson River eastward 20 miles, was originally Cortlandt Manor, granted by royal charter in 1697 to Stephanus Van Cortlandt, the first American-born Mayor of New York City. The Somers lands became the property of a descendant, Stephen Van Cortlandt, by allotment in 1734, and the Village was first named after him Stephen Town. This was later changed to Hanover, and again (in 1808) to its present name in honor of Capt. Richard Somers, one of the naval heroes of the war with Tripoli. Built most probably between 1823 and 1825, and now the Town Hall, this former hotel stands at highway crossroads near the centre of the Village, fronted by a small triangular village green.

Architectural Description

Scharf gives the following description of the hotel as he saw it in 1886. Bracketed corrections have been inserted by the architects of the present survey:

"It is made of brick which is manufactured on the farm, a few rods from the side of the hotel. The building is about sixty feet square, three stories in height, with a brick two-story addition in the rear used as a kitchen, and the second story as sleeping-rooms. [The main block is 40 by 46 feet, with 2-story brick wing, 20 by 17 feet.] It has an entrance on the south, consisting of stone, iron-railed steps, and a stone-floored portico, leading into a broad, high-ceilinged hall, which extends the length of the building. To the right of the main

hall is a short side hall, leading to a frame addition on the east side of the building, which contains twenty-six rooms [now 21 rooms above cellar] and is [was formerly] connected by a hallway on the second floor with a fine ball-room which has held social gatherings for several generations. [This was in the two-story frame addition mentioned above. It still stands, except about 30 feet at the near end of the structure which connected it with the hotel. This connecting part was struck by lightning and razed. The building where balls were held now contains the Post Office, Game Warden's office, and The Old Bet Club.]

"The inside partition walls", Scharf continues "are of brick, being carried up with the building. The whole is covered with a deck roof, on the top of which is a level space, railed in with an ornamental wooden railing, from which a fine view of the surrounding country can be obtained... It is owned by William Bailey"

Hist. of Westchester Co., II: 490

This mention of the roof must have been written by Scharf without close inspection. The roof is hipped, tin-standing-seam, truncated to form a flat tin deck, 12 by 19 feet, with a scuttle reached by a ladder. There is now no rail or indication of one.

Scharf also gave a detailed description of the curious monument which stands in front of the hotel.

Ibid., II: 490:-

"a single shaft of dressed granite some fifteen feet in height, resting on a double base...It is some sixteen inches square at the bottom, tapering to about twelve inches at the top, where it supports a scroll-work of wrought iron about three feet high, upon which stands a wooden



image of an elephant. This image is some three feet high by four in length and is a perfect fac-simile of an elephant. It was erected in 1827, and the miniature 'bet' was gilded. At present [1886], however, it presents a more natural appearance, being covered with a coat of mouse-colored paint. The image is composed of solid blocks of wood carved into proper shape."

"Today", wrote Agnes C. Dunlap in April, 1928, in

The quarterly Bulletin of the Westchester Co.
Hist. Soc., Vol. IV, no. 2,

"the lower floor of the building is used as a town hall. The upper floors are tenantless, and in the one-time bustling and hospitable kitchen of the hotel, where the fireplace reached from floor to ceiling, and the brick ovens afforded room for the roasting of six fifteen-pound turkeys at one time, hot waffles are served."

There is no evidence that this old red brick hotel has been materially altered inside or out. There is a cellar underneath it all, the foundation walls being faced outside with marble. The roof and main cornice are of metal.

It is all in excellent condition, and is one of the few remaining early highway taverns that are unchanged except in minor details. The southwest front room, for example, was converted into a bank and was so used until quite recently.

The general architectural effect is bald and substantial. A minor touch of refinement is found in the detail of shaped stone steps and simple, delicate iron railings, with spiral starters; also to some degree in the wood cornice of the porch. The fireplaces and interior architraves designed in the moulded and sunked corner-block style from which arose the typical "Eastlake" patterns, are interesting but



not distinguished by refinement of detail. The entire construction was extremely durable; there is not a single crack or defect visible after all these hundred years. (From field-notes of the architects of the present survey.)

Its Curious History

The old brick edifice bears testimony to the enterprise of Hachaliah Bailey, who initiated in America the business of the travelling menagerie, which in our time accompanies the circus. He built it with the help of profits obtained from buying and exhibiting the first elephant imported into the United States. The contemporary record of the importation of the first elephant is found in the

New Jersey Chronicle, April 30, 1796.

It was a female elephant, two years old, brought from Bengal to New York by the ship "America." There is also a record of the exhibition of that elephant in New York in August and September, 1806.

See Columbian Gazette, Aug. 26, 1806.

Again an elephant having the same name as Bailey's ("Betty" or "Old Bet") was exhibited in New England in 1815. It is believed possible that this was the same one killed at North Adams, Mass., by the breaking of a bridge she was crossing, bones of which are now in the museum of Williams College.

Mag. of Am. Hist., 1883. IX:215.

The date given above for the importation of the first elephant antedates by nearly twenty years the date (1815) assigned by Scharf in his

History of Westchester Co., Vol. II, p. 480.

He cites official records, however, for the statement that Hachaliah Bailey and five others were the first persons in Somers to receive, on May 4, 1802, County licenses to keep inns or taverns and sell liquors.



The story of Hachaliah Bailey's enterprises, as told by one of the family, William Bailey, was published in 1913 in

Westchester County in History, Vol. III, pp. 210-212.

He says that Hachaliah in 1815, "brought to Somers Town Plain the first elephant (Old Bet) that was imported to America." In that year, while "keeper of the 'Old Bull's Head Hotel' at 23d Street and 3d Avenue, New York City," he "heard of the incoming of an African elephant. To advertise his business somewhat, he purchased it and had it driven along the highways after dark to Somers Town Plain, where she was first exhibited in a barn." She was later exhibited throughout the Country, he says, and then taken to Connecticut; but, he explains at length, local objection was so great in that state that the elephant was shot and killed from ambush by prejudiced inhabitants. An earlier writer,

M. E. Frost, in Westchester County Magazine,
Vol. III, no. 6 (Sept., 1909), p. 1,

tells of a contretemps between Hachaliah and a partner on tour near Boston, in which the former asked for an accounting and being told the show had made no money retorted "I'll shoot my half (of the elephant) and you can do what you like with your half." The end of that elephant seems obscure, but Hachaliah erected a monument to her memory.

"About 1820", so William Bailey wrote, "was built the famous Elephant Hotel at Somers Town Plain, which contains a spacious ball-room, and which, during its continuance as a public house down to a recent period, was the scene of annual social events"; and on the village "Green," close to the hotel, was built "about the year 1825" the granite shaft which is still standing, surmounted by a miniature elephant. This odd device attracted so much notice in stage-coach days that it advertised the hotel far and wide.



In a long barn on the Gerard Crane farm, built for the purpose, was housed annually in winter in the early days the menagerie known as "The June, Angevine, Van Amburgh and Titus Polytechnic Institute." All of these names represented showmen's families residing in Somers and South Salem. The James A. Bailey who in 1850 joined P. T. Earnum as his partner in the circus business, was born in Chicago; he was adopted when a boy and renamed by one of the Bailey family. He became interested in him, and received his early training in Somers.

See Westchester Co. Mag., Vol. III, no. 6; and
Westchester Co. in History, Vol. III, both cited above.

Written, April 2, 1934, by

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